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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 006871

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: GOT POSITION ON PATRIARCH'S STATUS HAS NO LEGAL BASIS

REF: A. ANKARA 6768

[B](#). ANKARA 6628

[C](#). ANKARA 6116

Classified By: Classified by Political Counselor John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: There is no legal basis for the GOT's policy of denying the ecumenical status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul, an MFA official acknowledged. Though PM Erdogan and other GOT officials assert that the 1923 Lausanne Treaty establishes the Patriarch as the spiritual leader of only the Greek Orthodox community of Istanbul, the treaty in fact makes no reference to the Patriarch. Ecumenical status was first granted to the Patriarch in the sixth century by a holy synod. End Summary.

GOT Officials Cite Lausanne...

[1](#)2. (U) We met on December 8 with Nesrin Bayazit, head of the MFA Department of Greek Relations, to discuss the reasoning behind the GOT position that the Patriarch in Istanbul has no ecumenical status. As reported reftels A-B, GOT leaders protested the use of the term "Ecumenical Patriarchate" on an Embassy invitation to a December 2 event held for a group of visiting American Orthodox laymen. PM Erdogan, commenting on the invitation, asserted that the 1923 Lausanne Treaty denies the Patriarch ecumenical status.

[1](#)3. (U) Similarly, State Minister Atalay in October publicly chastised the Vatican Ambassador for referring to Patriarch Bartholomew I as the "Ecumenical Patriarch." Atalay claimed that the Patriarch's status as leader of only the Greek Orthodox community of Istanbul is "clearly defined under Lausanne." However, we noted, the Lausanne text makes no reference to the Patriarch whatsoever. We asked whether there is any legal basis for the GOT position.

...But MFA Concedes Treaty Silent on Patriarch

[1](#)4. (U) Bayazit, immediately and offhandedly, acknowledged that neither the Lausanne Treaty nor Turkish law defines the status of the Patriarch. It is, however, State policy not to recognize the Patriarch as ecumenical.

[1](#)5. (U) Bayazit showed us portions of the minutes of the Lausanne Peace Conference indicating that the Turkish delegation proposed abolishing the Patriarchate in exchange for allowing Istanbul's Greek population to remain in the city. She noted that the Patriarch had given support to invading Greek troops after the First World War, and was considered an enemy of the new Republic of Turkey. In the end, the Turkish delegation at Lausanne was forced to accept the Patriarchate's continued presence in Istanbul. The Treaty guarantees the rights of "non-Muslim minorities" to "establish, manage and control" religious institutions. But, she averred defensively, the treaty -- the "founding document of the Republic" -- does not state that the Patriarch has ecumenical status, and the GOT therefore maintains that he represents only the Greek Orthodox of Istanbul.

[1](#)6. (U) We noted that the Lausanne Treaty is an 80-year-old document and that it does not reflect contemporary Western values. There is nothing preventing the GOT from expanding the concept of minority rights beyond the bounds of Lausanne. Bayazit claimed that relations between the GOT and Patriarch have improved steadily over time. The GOT long ago ceased interfering in the internal affairs of the Patriarchate or restricting the Patriarch's travel. However, the issue remains sensitive. The GOT will have to move carefully in any further efforts to loosen restrictions on the Patriarchate, lest "nationalists and other marginal groups" use such reforms to stir political controversy. "People don't forget that the Patriarchate is an institution that tried to destroy the State," she said.

Ecumenical Title Dates to 6th Century

17. (U) According to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the term "ecumenical" was first granted to the Patriarch of Constantinople in the sixth century by a synod, and has been used ever since. The Ecumenical Patriarchate currently has competence and jurisdiction over the Orthodox churches of a number of countries in Europe and the Americas, as well as Australia. The Ecumenical Patriarch provides spiritual leadership for approximately 40 dioceses, including thousands of churches, philanthropic and educational institutions, and millions of Orthodox faithful. In addition, the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate conducts the elections of bishops and archbishops for the dioceses under its authority.

Comment

18. (C) Ideally, discussions with the Turks on minority issues should not revolve around the Lausanne Treaty. As a GOT human rights board recently reported (reftel C), Lausanne is an outmoded document. However, the GOT constantly refers to Lausanne, relying on a gross misinterpretation of the treaty to support its positions on a number of religious freedom and minority rights issues. It is worth noting that Article 39 of Lausanne states that, "No restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings." The GOT ignores this article -- Turkish law has long restricted the use of minority languages -- while aggressively upholding a non-existent article on the status of the Patriarch.

19. (U) Bayazit betrayed another inconsistency in the Turkish position by charging that the Patriarchate tried to destroy "the State." Her remark reflects Turkey's attempt to blur the sharp legal break between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey -- the "State" she refers to pre-dated the Republic. Though 80 years have passed since Turkey's War of Independence, the Turkish State continues to view the Patriarchate with deep suspicion -- a reality underscored by the fact that GOT relations with the Patriarchate are still handled by the MFA Department of Greek Relations.

110. (C) Bayazit was first puzzled, then dismissive when we expressed concerns that the spiritual center of Orthodoxy might be pulled to Moscow if the Ecumenical Patriarchate fades away. Her reaction illustrates another aspect of Ankara's lack of analysis and strategic planning on the matter.

111. (C) Much of the press commentary on the "ecumenical" controversy served to spread the common misperceptions about the Patriarch's status. But several columnists criticized the GOT's position and called attention to the fact that Lausanne does not address the issue. A number of writers rhetorically asked why the Turkish State insists on rejecting the Patriarch's ecumenical status; Radikal columnist Ismet Berkan offered an answer: "Because we do not like the Greeks."
EDELMAN